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## *Cardinal Principles, Historical and Archival*

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# *Cardinal Principles, Historical and Archival*

WARREN M. BILLINGS\*

This first convention of our association invites observations on the present state of documentary editing. As a branch of learning, documentary editing has come of age, for underlying its practice are principles and values that make it as distinctive a field of inquiry as say quantitative history or literary criticism. That it has matured is due in no small measure to scholars like our president and president-elect, who rank among the pioneers of modern editorial methods. Documentary editing has gained in popularity, as witness the growth of this organization in just its first year of existence or the increasing number of graduate programs in which editing is a part of their course offerings. For example, the second edition of the American Historical Association's *Guide to Departments of History*, published in 1977, listed 19 graduate departments that offered classes in editing, whereas the 1979 edition numbers a total of 24 departments. This change represents an increase of 20 percent in just two years.

One probable import of these statistics is their reflection of efforts by history departments to prepare their graduate students with skills that will enhance their attractiveness in a declining job market. The figures may also indicate a

trend toward the day when graduate schools become the chief breeding ground for future documentary editors. Whatever their portent, they certainly argue the advisability of having working editors periodically examine the manner in which future practitioners are trained.

Because this association is committed to encouraging excellence in documentary editing, it can be the ideal vehicle for making such examinations. The membership can take a leading part in establishing standards to guide those of us who instruct young scholars in the mysteries of our craft. To do that, though, we ought to have a clear understanding as to how we wish to train future editors, especially the solo practitioner who is the most numerous of the genus documentary editor. We therefore might consider such questions as:

1. Who should teach documentary editing?
2. What constitutes sufficient evidence of professional competence, an M.A. degree program that emphasizes editorial training, work at the Ph.D. level, or both?
3. How many courses suffice to prepare an editor?
4. What should be the content of those courses?
5. How do courses in editing relate to a graduate department's more traditional offerings?
6. Will faculties accept editorial projects in lieu of theses or dissertations?

Finally, what sorts of students should be encouraged to become documentary editors?

As Professor Myerson remarked in his introduction, I regularly teach a documentary editing seminar. I have

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done it long enough now that I should feel neither too brash nor too ignorant in attempting to address these questions. Moreover, to judge from contacts that I have with my counterparts elsewhere, my own experience is not unlike others whose departments have recently turned to documentary editing as a means of providing their students with an alternate set of job skills. It also points up the need for standards to guide both departments and individual instructors who launch editing curricula. My own experience convinces me that a one semester course is inadequate evidence of competent training. The element of time works against both teacher and student. So that students may be set to working with manuscripts as soon as possible, an instructor has to introduce theory and practice in very short order. The student must then rapidly absorb a bewildering array of new information even as he begins to struggle with his project, which he is pressed to complete by term's end. The net result is an introduction to editing whose value is slight at best, questionable at worst.

These shortcomings are all the more palpable when the class is offered by departments that grant only the masters degree. M.A. candidates, especially beginners, frequently lack a sense of direction. They can flounder aimlessly through an editing class for almost an entire semester before they find their bearings. At that juncture, they can do little more than try to salvage themselves by completing the course requirements as best they can. Thereafter, should they decide that editing interests them, they have little chance for additional training. The only other possible outlet is to do an editorial project in place of a thesis—a route that presents certain difficulties. Some faculty members do not regard edited work as valid substitutes for theses, though others see such substitutions as a means of routing marginal students to oblivion. In either case, such views do not serve the craft of editing well.

A program that would meet these deficiencies as it provided sound training for future editors might contain the following elements. First, it could be offered by either M.A. or Ph.D. granting institutions provided its credit-hour requirements were equal to those needed for a concentration or a minor in a graduate degree curriculum. Whether taken as an alternate form of masters degree or in lieu of a traditional minor doctoral field, the program should be given by those graduate departments that have appropriate resources. These resources would take the form of archives that could be used for instructional purposes, a major editorial project, or both. The faculty who teach the courses should be experienced documentary editors as evidenced by significant publication and current practice editing. The program should also consist of no less than one year's study. During that time equal emphasis should be devoted to the theory and practice of editing, as well as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their level of accomplishment through independent work with

documentary collections.

How do departments that give editing courses measure up to these criteria? And, would their faculties accede to their validity? At present, no one can say for certain. Given the growing popularity of documentary editing, perhaps now is the time to find out how it is being taught. The ADE can be a valuable tool for providing answers, and I should like to conclude by proposing a way to find them. We ought to empower a committee to examine graduate education in documentary editing. Such an investigation would fulfill three purposes. First, it would accumulate detailed information about what is being taught, by whom, and in what schools. In turn, since our membership cuts across several academic disciplines, the proposed committee would become a clearinghouse of information about the teaching of editing in several fields. Finally, the data could also be employed to develop a set of professional standards that could be used to judge the quality of existing programs and to aid in establishing new ones.

Such a committee might be styled the "Committee on Education and Standards." Its members would represent each of the disciplines that comprise ADE's membership. Individual committeemen would assume responsibility for collecting data in the areas of their expertise. The information itself could be gathered via a questionnaire that was designed to elicit the desired responses.

If such a committee did no more than compile information and disseminate its findings, it would have performed a yeoman service. That material would be of value to a department that contemplates a program in editing, just as it could assist teachers, both present and future. In fact, such evidence would have been a boon to me as I thought about preparing this paper. But transforming the raw data into a set of standards will also establish the ADE as the authoritative spokesman for the entire brotherhood of documentary editors on matters of professional concern.

This proposal owes an intellectual debt to the Society of American Archivists. As some of you may know, for some time now that society has been inquiring into matters that are similar to ones discussed here. Recently, the SAA published the results of that inquiry, and it influenced my thinking about the present condition of education for documentary editors. Moreover, if something comes of this suggestion, we might print and distribute our own rules. We might also solicit the archivists' assistance in devising means to acquire the data that are necessary to draft those guidelines.

Within our group lies the chance to shape the preparation of future editors for time to come. But there is no need to act precipitously; we can make haste deliberately. For now, it is enough to create a committee and set it to assembling those facts that are necessary for further action.